

29 April 1984

KALB: Good day from Washington. I am Marvin Kalb inviting you to Meet the Press with Sen. Joseph Biden, a strong critic of the president's foreign policy.

ANNOUNCER: Meet the Press, an unrehearsed press conference, is a public affairs presentation of NBC News.

KALB: Our guest today on Meet the Press is Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware who was first elected to the U.S. Senate 12 years ago, when he was 29. Sen. Biden is now the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee. He is also a member of the Foreign Relations, Budget and Intelligence Committees, and with this background he challenges administration policy across the board. Our reporters today are Morton Kondracke of The New Republic, Gloria Borger of Newsweek, Robert Novak of The Chicago Sun-Times, and to open the questioning, our regular panelist, Bill Monroe of NBC News.

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NOVAK: Sen. Biden, there's been a lot of noise from Democrats in the Senate about being...information being withheld from you by the CIA on the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors by the contras. Isn't it a fact that you were well aware of that operation, you personally, were well aware of that operation when the debate in the Senate took place? BIDEN: We were well aware of it from news accounts. I quite frankly find myself in a bit of a bind answering that question because I was the only person voting against that operation from the aid to the contras since the changing of the so-called presidential finding, the second finding. I think the admini...that the committee's almost as much at fault here as in fact, the agency is. The agency did not level. The agency did not tell us the extent of their involvement. And they did not tell us the extent of the president's involvement. But we did not ask the right questions.

NOVAK: But sir, isn't it true that you were personally, quite apart from news accounts, that personally you were briefed by the CIA on the mining operations before the debate in the Senate? BIDEN: No. That's not true. What we were in fact briefed about, on two occasions, about two months after the fact, was that in a compendium of a number of things that were occurring, dropped in as number 17, was, and by the way, there are mines there. They never told us though, the degree to which there was direct U.S. involvement in that process.

NOVAK: Well, aren't the mines a red herring, sir? Isn't it a fact that you're opposed to the contras being financed to U.S. funds to overthrow the Sandinista regime? BIDEN: Me, personally?

NOVAK: Yes, sir. BIDEN: Yes. I am personally opposed to the way in which we are going about that.

NOVAK: Can I ask you one other thing, sir? BIDEN: Sure, you can ask me...

NOVAK: Who would you prefer running the government of Nicaragua, the communists who are in power there now, or the people who are trying for a democratic regime and fighting with the contras? BIDEN: I'd prefer the people trying for the democratic regime.

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KALB: Miss Borger?

BORGER: Now that the CIA has ensured (sic) the Senate Intelligence Committee that the mining has stopped and the CIA Director Bill Casey has apologized to the committee, do you think that the CIA will approve money for covert actions in Nicaragua? BIDEN: Possibly, but unlikely. It will depend a lot on the, how closely proscribed those operations are. My opposition, to go back, to answer your question and part of the last question, to elaborate on it.... My opposition was that the stated goals that the administration said it had were inconsistent with the actions the administration was taking. I am prepared to, and was for the first five months, prepared to vote for and did vote for funding for the contras, to allow the contras to be involved in activities that were disrupting the flow of arms into El Salvador. When that presidential memorandum changed, so that it gave broad discretion to do much more than that, in my view, to overthrow the government, to in fact get us deeply involved in the process, that's when I decided that the nature of the operation had changed and I could no longer support it.

BORGER: But didn't Ronald Reagan send a letter to the Senate a few weeks ago when the Senate was debating this, saying that it was not the administration's objective to overthrow or destabilize the government in Nicaragua..? BIDEN: Yes, he did, and I don't believe it.

BORGER: ...is there still confusion? You don't believe it? BIDEN: He said it. Director Casey said it. But, I know, Mr. Novak knows and everybody knows that the intention is different from that.

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BORGER: I want to ask a question about congressional oversight of the Central Intelligence Agency. Is the lack of direct communication that your committee has been complaining about lately due in particular to CIA Director Bill Casey?

Or is oversight of the CIA essentially a mission impossible? BIDEN: Oversight of the CIA is not a mission impossible. But it requires an adoption of an attitude on the part of the committee that you all have adopted toward us. We have...you do not trust us in public office, nor should you. You, we have a relationship which is based upon respect, but one that you don't accept anything I say from the mere fact I said it. It's an adversarial relationship. That should be the relationship between the committee and the agency to which we're to oversee. We should not be co-opted by it. And when the agency comes forward and says we are doing A and not B, we should ask for concrete proof that they in fact are doing only A and not B. We should hold them to a very close standard. We have not done that.

BORGER: Is this director, is this director a particular problem for this committee? BIDEN: This director is a particular problem. He is a man who does not have a great deal of trust in the minds of many of the members of the committee. I would say almost all.

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BORGER: Presumably the White House also has oversight functions when it comes to the CIA. Do you get the sense that Ronald Reagan is in close contact with Casey or that he is operating on his own? BIDEN: Let me make it clear. I don't believe Mr. Casey's out on his own. I don't believe the agency is out on its own. I don't think this is a case of the agency run amok. I think this is a case of the agency following up directly on administration policy and, on occasion, refusing to outline to us or failing to outline to us what the extent of that administration policy that they in fact are fulfilling is.

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MONROE: Sen. Biden, the Pentagon says that at rare intervals, it sounds as if they're talking about every two or three weeks, they send a reconnaissance plane over Nicaragua to take some photographs. The Washington Post, quoting a military source, American source in Honduras, says we're sending planes over Nicaragua every couple of days, CIA, Army planes, Air Force planes. What can you tell us about the facts of American recon planes over Nicaragua and your attitude toward our flying any of those flights? BIDEN: It's classified. I can't tell you anything about it. But I can tell you, in terms of general policy, whether or not I would support the notion, assuming they are taking place of reconnaissance flights over Nicaragua. The answer is yes.

MONROE: Do you have any problem with frequency of flights? BIDEN: I have no problem with frequency of flights. I have no problem with reconnaissance generally.

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